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FM AMEMBASSY BAKU
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INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES PRIORITY
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 3116
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 1180

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 001062

SIPDIS

FOR EUR/CARC AND DRL

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [AJ](#)

SUBJECT: GOAJ MAY TAKE RADIO LIBERTY AND VOA OFF AIRWAVES

Classified By: Political and Economic Counselor Robert Garverick, for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: On November 4 Embassy officials met with Nushiravan Maharramov, Chairman of the National Television and Radio Council, regarding his announcement that foreign broadcasters would be banned from Azerbaijan's airwaves starting in 2009, including Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and Voice of America. Maharramov confirmed this news, stating that it was necessary in order to be in compliance with Azerbaijani law and international standards. He stressed that Azerbaijan is in a tough neighborhood, and can not keep out Russian and Iranian broadcasting while allowing American, British, and Turkish channels. Maharramov believes that a possible way to allow American broadcasters to stay on the air would be through an intergovernmental agreement. The timing of this decision, after six years of ignoring the law prohibiting foreign broadcasters from using national frequencies, seems to be the GOAJ's desire for more control of the media environment after the Russian invasion of Georgia and in advance of the 2010 parliamentary elections.
END SUMMARY

12. (C) On November 4 Embassy officials met with the Chairman of the National Television and Radio Council (NTRC) Nushiravan Maharramov. Maharramov had announced to the press on October 31 that all foreign broadcasters would be banned from Azerbaijan's airwaves starting in 2009. This would include American broadcasters Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) and Voice of America (VOA), as well as the British Broadcasting Company (BBC).

13. (C) In the meeting, Maharramov insisted that the removal of foreign broadcasters from ownership of Azerbaijan's frequencies is necessary under Azerbaijani law, and that during the past six years this law has not been enforced. Maharramov also believes that this move will put Azerbaijan in compliance with European standards. When asked for an official copy of this decision, Maharramov said that no official decision had been taken yet, and that it would not be taken until a meeting of the Council scheduled for late December. He insisted that the NTRC would enforce this law, unless told by higher powers such as the Presidential Apparatus that it was not in the national interest to do so.

14. (C) Maharramov repeated several times the argument that Azerbaijan is in a tough neighborhood, and is a nation at war, and therefore it wants to keep out Russian and Iranian broadcasters. It cannot, however, continue making an exception for American and British broadcasts while keeping other countries out. As a rhetorical device, Maharramov said even Al-Jazeera might come to Azerbaijan, to which Embassy

officials replied that Al-Jazeera operates in the United States without any problems. Maharramov also stated that with parliamentary elections upcoming, he did not want any media outlet to be used as a political tool.

¶5. (C) When asked about the possibility of affiliation agreements, Maharramov replied that these would also be illegal, unless the programs were re-branded as products of local stations, removing the BBC, VOA, or RFE/RL logo identifiers. (NOTE: RFE/RL reports that it broadcasts in most countries through affiliation agreements with local stations. In Azerbaijan, RFE/RL had an affiliation with the local broadcasting company ANS until this right was taken from ANS in 2006.) A possible way to keep RFE/RL and VOA on the air, Maharramov said, would be an intergovernmental agreement that would allow reciprocal broadcasting of Azerbaijani media in the United States. Currently, only Turkey has such an agreement, and Maharramov said this agreement was illegal, as well, because it only allows Azerbaijani TV to broadcast via cable, while Turkish television is aired on a national frequency in Azerbaijan.

COMMENT

¶6. (C) In Azerbaijan's strictly controlled media environment, foreign broadcasters represent some of the only sources of independent, unbiased news. Moreover, they are genuinely popular with the Azerbaijani people, as they are more professional and generally considered more entertaining

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than the local media. The reasoning for this change, therefore, seems to be a desire by the GOAJ for more control over news coverage, stemming perhaps from fear of the upcoming parliamentary election as well as the influence of Russia after the invasion of Georgia.
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